

Review of
***Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*,**
edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll
(Madison, Wisconsin: the University of Wisconsin Press, 1996)
xviii & 564 pages, \$45.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper

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In 1959, Alfred Ayer, the foremost English advocate of logical positivism, published an anthology of essays by the bright, energetic and argumentative men who had earlier this century committed themselves to reconstructing philosophy uncontaminated by metaphysics, emulating the latest exact science on the block, mathematical logic.

Ayer's anthology, *Logical Positivism*, is now of interest only to historians, for in the same year appeared the English translation of Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, preceded a year earlier by Norwood Hanson's *Patterns of Discovery*, and followed three years later by Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The three authors, despite differences, demolished the pretensions of positivism: no literate philosopher would ever again suggest that philosophy, or anything else, could be reconstructed without metaphysical presuppositions, much less scientifically, for every science, as David Park, the quantum physicist, was to remark of his own, "swims in metaphysics like a fish swims in water, supported by it on all sides but unconscious of its existence until something goes wrong".

I was reminded of Ayer's anthology, and of the promise, pretence and passing of positivism, by the collection of Bordwell and Carroll. The question is not how to register the articles by others found within it, for all have been written cleanly, address their topics without obfuscation and permit independent evaluation. After a pair of introductory essays by the editors, the book consists of three sections, one on "Film Theory & Aesthetics", another on the "Psychology of Film", and the last on "History and Analysis". Readers familiar with previous work of the authors will find therein welcome refinements and additions (notably by Currie, Freeland, Leibowitz, Levinson, Livingston and Plantinga and by the editors themselves), fruitful historical conjectures are newly made or reassessed (by Balio, Crafton, Gomery, Hjort and Kepley) and relevant work in perceptual psychology is summarized and extended (by the Andersons, Hochberg and Brooks, and Gerrig and Prentice).

Nor is the question a matter of identity of theme or method, for the anthologies differ widely in their claims for authorial unity. Bordwell and Carroll, unlike Ayer, claim correctly that no "homogeneous doctrine", theoretical or procedural, unifies the works anthologised (pages xv & 62). They stress proudly that no one of their authors need be committed to the cognitivist "stance" assumed by themselves; indeed, they themselves disagree on the exact nature of the cognitivist "stance" (pages xvi & 2). The only

commonality to be found among the works, they insist, is that no author relies upon what Bordwell calls "Grand Theory" and in particular upon that quasi-psychoanalytical 'Theory' that has permeated film studies since its inception in the 1970s (pages 3f).

To the uninitiated, an anthology pretending to be linked only by the absence of a unifying "psychoanalytic framework" might seem as unpromising as a gallery exhibit by painters eschewing blue, and such worries might be compounded upon noticing that the editors consider themselves to be outsiders, attacking the film studies "establishment", despite one of them being the best-selling author in the history of film studies and the other a well published, ranking officer of the American Society for Aesthetics (page xiii). But the editors are right: given the domination of French farce masquerading as film studies, the very publication of their anthology is of historical importance, as a gallery exhibit of paintings done without blue would be provocative within a society that had historically demanded it, and few of the prolific writings of either editor have received the critical attention they deserve.

The question, rather, is what to make of the editors' claim, encapsulated in the subtitle, that their anthology, despite its disunity, shows us how to "reconstruct film studies"? Here, I suggest, lies the deeper identity between this anthology and that of Ayer, for just as the positivists sought to exclude metaphysics from philosophy by reconstructing it to look scientific, so we in film studies, the editors' suggest, ought to proceed by refusing to invoke any general theoretical approach to our problem-solving enterprise, forswearing in particular any Freudian access to it, relying instead upon some kind of piecemeal, inductive procedural "stance", recognizable, we are told, by anyone attuned to the nuances of the new "cognitivism" and enabling anyone, it seems, to bring empirical evidence of any kind to bear upon any problem of any kind in film studies, be it historical, perceptual, or analytical, unsupported by any "Grand Theory", much less metaphysical commitments.

The editors differ in their summaries of this "stance". Bordwell, as bluntly as the positivists a half-century before him, insists that film studies "need carry *no* determining philosophical assumptions about subjectivity or culture, *no* univocal metaphysical or epistemological or political presumptions – in short, no commitment to Grand Theory" (page 29). Carroll, better acquainted with the issues, acknowledges that such presumptions may exist, but suggests equivalently that it would be useless at present to strive to uncover them, for, having confused distinctiveness with essentialism, Carroll cannot fathom how the search could be viable (pages 39 and 58). The method of film studies must rather be "dialectical", demolishing previous arguments with better ones (pages xiv & 56f). (How Carroll can suppose, here and elsewhere, that media distinctiveness entails essentialism passes understanding, for, as Wittgenstein

everywhere insisted, philosophy must help us to distinguish things rightly *because* there can be no essential differences between them!)

Dialectical attack, of course, was the method of the positivists, for, when push came to shove, they had no choice: though they spoke much of philosophy, science and mathematics and how to do them better, none of them had trained themselves to be able to do first-rate work in any of the disciplines of which they spoke. The positivists failed, even while amplifying superficial differences between themselves and their supposed metaphysical antagonists, because they overlooked a deeper identity: neither they nor their antagonists had immersed themselves within any of the disciplines of which they spoke; none could contribute constructively to their advancement, much less by constructing useful 'theories'; hence none could recognize the exact nature and value of the contributions of others before them, constrained always by the metaphysical presumptions of the day.

But now we have come to the crux of my misgivings concerning Bordwell's and Carroll's claims for this anthology. The differences within film studies between the new "cognitivists" and the old "psychoanalysts" are superficial, masking a profoundly enervating identity, namely that none of them (I overspeak slightly here but not much) has bothered to learn how to make films well. None of them on either side of the divide, while claiming to tell us how films have been, are or should be made, has bothered to acquire the hands-on experience with the problems of filmmaking required to comprehend adequately its history, much less to contribute to its theory. One needn't be a major filmmaker to theorize helpfully about it, but to presume that one can know how films are made without having struggled to make them better, and then to chatter on about how it ought to be done, is like trying to write a book on piano-playing without ever having learned to play competently, much less to play with distinctive musicality while pondering why.

Bordwell and Carroll note, in passing, that the new "cognitivism" is only one of several candidates for reconstructing film studies (pages xii, xvi & 51). Why, then, are no others represented in this anthology committed supposedly to a "methodologically robust pluralism" and pointedly "dialectical" (page 62)? Where are the phenomenologists (Casebier, Sobchack, for example), approaching film studies from within the "Grand Theory" of Husserl and his successors? Or Cavell and his students, registering it as central to the Austin-Wittgenstein programme of distinctive categorising through the commonplace (and thus, as Cavell insists, returning to Kant)?

The answer is obvious: since the alternative candidates for "reconstructing film studies" acknowledge the impressive and well examined "Grand Theories" upon which they rest, rather than denying their centrality, they can have no place within a redressed positivism. The new "cognitivism" in film studies is the old positivism in drag: different costume, same intent. While signalling perhaps a new paradigm in film studies, I fear that little of distinguishing value will come of it.